

LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT



Sears, Roebuck and Company Administration Building

3333 West Arthington Street

Submitted to the Commission on Chicago Landmarks in June 2002



CITY OF CHICAGO

Richard M. Daley, Mayor

Department of Planning and Development

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Above

Since its construction in 1905-06, the Sears, Roebuck and Company mail order plant, situated on Chicago's West Side, has been symbolic of that company's dominance of the mail order and merchandising industries. In this aerial view from the 1950's, the Administration Building is marked by a white arrow. The Merchandise Building, on the right, has since been demolished except for its tower.

Cover

The Sears catalog cover from 1900 reflected the ideals of retailing at the end of the nineteenth century. Dependability and low price were the messages in this classic cover.

The Commission on Chicago Landmarks, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, was established in 1968 by city ordinance. It is responsible for recommending to the City Council that individual buildings, sites, objects, or entire districts be designated as Chicago Landmarks, which protects them by law. The Commission is staffed by the Chicago Department of Planning and Development, 33 N. LaSalle St., Room 1600, Chicago, IL 60602; phone: 312.744.3200; TTY: 312.744.2958; fax: 312.744.9140; web site: <http://www.cityofchicago.org/landmarks>.

This Landmark Designation Report is subject to possible revision and amendment during the designation proceedings. Only language contained within the designation ordinance adopted by the City Council should be regarded as final.

Sears, Roebuck and Company Administration Building

3333 West Arthington Street

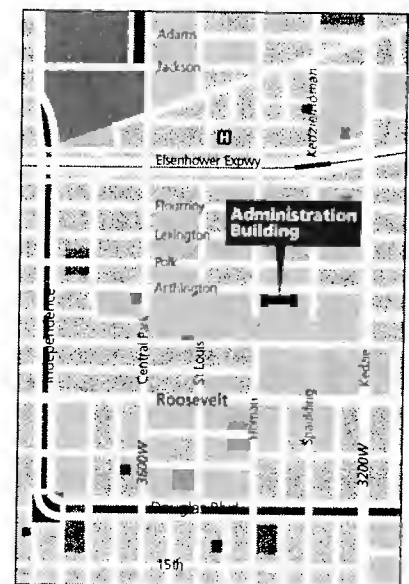
Date: 1905 (original two-story building)
1914 (top three stories)

Architects: Nimmons and Fellows (1905)
George C. Nimmons and Co. (1914)

The Sears, Roebuck and Company Administration Building, located in the North Lawndale community area on Chicago's West Side, was the office headquarters for the largest mail-order and merchandise company in the United States from its completion in 1905 until 1973 when the company moved to the Sears Tower in downtown Chicago. One of the city's most significant companies, Sears grew at a rapid pace from its founding in 1894 to become one of the country's most important purveyors of goods to small-town and rural America.

The Administration Building is closely associated with the careers of three important Sears, Roebuck and Company executives. Richard W. Sears was the company's founder and first president. Julius Rosenwald, who succeeded Sears as company president, was the driving force behind the construction of the Sears headquarters, was significant in the company's expansion during the early 20th century, and was a leading philanthropist, supporting the University of Chicago, Adler Planetarium and a variety of African-American causes throughout the United States. Robert Wood, Sears' third president, promoted the expansion of the company into retail stores throughout the United States from the 1920s through the 1950s.

The Administration Building, along with most other buildings in the Sears complex, was designed by George C. Nimmons, a significant architect of large-scale industrial and commercial buildings. Working first with partner William K. Fellows, then in solo practice, Nimmons was widely known as a master in combining Chicago School principles, including the clear and rational visual expression of structure, with Classical- and Prairie-style ornament.





The red brick and white terra-cotta Administration Building remains as the primary representation of the company's history.

Description

Located at the corner of Arthington and Homan in the center of the Sears, Roebuck and Company complex, the long, symmetrical facade of the Administration Building presents a formal arrangement of dark red brick and terra-cotta detailing with an ornate, projecting entry portico. Classical Revival details are applied on the building's functional, cellular form while projecting piers and recessed spandrels emphasize the cellular fenestration pattern typical of the Chicago School. Horizontal beltcourses, flat ornamentation and peaked parapets at the building's cornice are reminiscent of Nimmon's Prairie School influence. The building is I-shaped in plan and of masonry construction, measuring approximately 436 feet long by 141 feet in depth. The principal facade faces Arthington on the north toward a park across the street. The ornate facade treatments are extended around to the west and east elevations of the building. The south elevation, clad with common brick, faces the Power House.

The Administration Building was constructed in 1905 as one of the four main original buildings of the Sears, Roebuck and Company Mail Order Plant, a complex which was continually enlarged over the years. The other original buildings consisted of the Merchandise Building with its 225' tall tower (since demolished except for the tower), the Printing

and Advertising Building and the Power House. In 1907 the garden with its large pergola was constructed just across Arthington Street from the Administration Building, and in 1908 large, one-story athletic field houses for men and women were built (since demolished). Many smaller structures were added over the years which have since been demolished, but the 1949 original headquarters building for Allstate remains, constructed to the east of the Printing and Advertising Building.

The Administration Building was originally a two-story building on a raised basement. Due to the rapid growth of the company, in 1914 it was enlarged by the construction of three additional floors. The structural system is masonry and steel. The exterior walls are red brick with white glazed terra-cotta trim ornamented with blue terra-cotta medallions at the cornice. Terra-cotta elements include the base of the building on the north and west street facades, window pilasters and surrounds at the building corners, continuous belt courses above the second and fifth floors, sills, pier blocks, and trim. The main entrance is set within a projecting portico at the central bay of the north facade. A terra-cotta entablature directly above the tri-partite entry carries the words, "Sears, Roebuck, and Co." divided into one word above each set of entry doors. Another ornamental entablature at the top of the portico carries the words "Administration Building." A secondary street entrance, which has been altered, is located at the center bay of the west street façade. The building has wood-framed, double-hung windows throughout, with divided light transoms at the lower floors.

The main entry doors lead into a spacious lobby with a black-and-white marble tiled floor and white marble cladding on the walls. Above the marble are paneled walls with ornamental plaster cornices. A grand marble staircase ascends to the stairhall, which is entered through three separate openings in reflection of the outer entry doors. At the south rear of the stairhall is a wide staircase with ornamental iron newel posts, balusters and framing, and terrazzo treads. This design is repeated in the additional eight staircases, all intact, that rise through the building. The first floor corridor retains a terrazzo floor and marble wainscot, as do a few other corridor areas throughout the building.

For most of its life with Sears, the Administration Building was a beehive of activity, filled to over-capacity with the employees necessary to operate a multitude of functions. In addition to the executive offices, originally the entire clerical force which received mail and dispatched orders to the Merchandise Building was located in the building. The Auditing and Banking departments were located on the first floor, along with the headquarters of the Seroco Mutual Benefit Association and Employees' (sic) Savings Department. The second floor housed the Mail



Between 1906 and 1914, employees went to work in the original two-story Administration Building (center), located between the Printing and Advertising Building (on left) and the Merchandise Building with tower (on right).



Workers entered the Administration Building through the marble-clad lobby, which remains today. Its elegance indicated the company's desire to provide attractive surroundings for its employees, as well as concern for corporate appearance beyond the utilitarian.



Early in the twentieth century, large numbers of typists worked in rooms like this order-taking department in The Administration Building, processing about 50,000 orders a day.



The Seroco restaurant, located in the basement of the Administration Building, was one of numerous dining facilities in the complex which provided meals and dining areas for 9,000 employees.

Opening and Mail Auditing Departments and the Correspondence Division, where, by 1910, 7,000 letters were handled each day. The building also contained a Recreation Room and Library.

The restaurant facilities were located in the basement of the Administration Building. By 1908 there were five separate restaurants in the building, including Men's and Women's separate cafeterias, a Grill Room, and a Dining Room, which together provided meals for 9,000 employees. There was also a separate dining area for employees who brought their own lunch.

By 1918, departments housed in the building included Mail Opening and Cash Entry; Order Sorting; Entry Department, with 500 typists; Scribing Department, where labels were prepared by 300 clerks; Index and Routing, where records were kept; Distribution Department, which prepared shipping schedules for the various departments; Correspondence Department, with secretaries taking dictation and typing; Catalog Addressing Department, where 400 employees and 12 motor-driven addressing machines prepared address labels for 65 million catalogues. By the 1920s, the Administration Building processed 70,000 letters a day.

HISTORY

The Administration Building was designed and constructed as the executive headquarters for Sears, Roebuck and Company, part of the complex that was completed in Chicago's North Lawndale neighborhood in late 1905. As a rapidly expanding merchandise company, Sears was a leader in the mail order industry which grew out of Chicago and changed the face of the cultural Midwest. Its processing, manufacturing, printing, shipping and warehousing activities contributed to the economic development and social order of Chicago and the city's West Side. Chicago was ideally located to bring country and city together through the catalogs which offered a glimpse of city life and direct access to products with no "middle man." According to William Cronon in *Nature's Metropolis*,

Henceforth, it needn't really matter whether one lived in city or country, for the good life could be purchased by mail wherever one made one's home. The advent of the post office's rural free delivery in 1896 was an immediate consequence of the public demand that Ward and Sears had helped create, and it pointed the way to the roads, telephones, electrical networks, and chain stores that would transform the rural landscape of America in the twentieth century.

It would also, as Cronon points out, provide a conduit for transmitting the wealth of the rural areas back to the city.

Sears did not begin in Chicago, but it achieved its most lasting importance as a retail giant here. Richard Sears began his merchandising career selling watches in Minneapolis, but when he sold that concern in 1890 he was prevented from selling watches under his own name for three years. Consequently, he appointed watchmaker A. C. Roebuck as secretary-treasurer to the company and founded it as A. C. Roebuck, Inc. In September of 1893 the restriction ended, and Sears added his own name, renaming the firm Sears, Roebuck and Company. It occupied quarters in the Globe Building in Minneapolis, but in 1893 Sears also opened a branch office and shipping depot in Chicago, offering an expanded line of merchandise. There were a number of reasons for locating in Chicago, not least of which were the convergence of transportation systems and the presence of a thriving printing industry. The city was experiencing explosive growth following the consolidation of the railroads, with easy distribution of goods in and out of the city, availability of an ample work force, and proximity to a center of finance and commerce.

By 1894, net sales were \$393,323. In that year, Richard Sears was introduced to Julius Rosenwald by Rosenwald's brother-in-law, though Rosenwald was already supplying wholesale clothing to Sears for mail



Products were sent to homes throughout the United States from shipping rooms in the Merchandise Building connected by rail directly to Chicago's vast transportation system.

order sales. The company was reincorporated under Illinois law in 1894, with Sears remaining as president and Rosenwald as vice president. According to their respective talents, Sears was primarily responsible for advertising and sales promotion, and Rosenwald for merchandise line and administration. In January of 1895, the Minneapolis and Chicago offices were consolidated into a building at 171-175 West Adams Street in Chicago, and the firm had 80 employees. Organization became difficult as sales grew rapidly, and working conditions in these early years were crowded and dirty. The company expanded into additional buildings in the city, leading to decentralization and yet more disorganization. During this time, the company had four separate shipping departments.

Rosenwald encouraged the expansion of a range of merchandise, which, along with low prices and satisfaction guarantees, led to even more rapid increase in sales. By 1896, the catalog carried most general merchandise available in the country at that time including clothing, wagons and buggies, harnesses, farm equipment, plumbing supplies, household furnishings, dishes, dry goods, watches, jewelry, firearms, sewing machines, bicycles, and musical instruments. But Rosenwald also saw the need for a better and more centralized system, for by 1899 the number of employees had grown to 1,720.

Rosenwald also encouraged and implemented programs for improved employee relations and benefits. The personnel policy stressed self improvement and individual initiative. General manager Elmer Scott instituted early employee welfare efforts and initiated a plan to provide a training school for employees. As early as 1899 the Seroco Club was formed to improve department managers' relations with their staffs. In 1901 an employee publication *The Skylight*, first appeared, and in 1902 the Seroco Mutual Benefit Association was organized to provide employee insurance. The firm also initiated first aid and general health services for employees, with a medical department which by 1919 became an 18-room hospital in the Merchandise Building. The company made arrangements with the Chicago Public Library to circulate books among employees. The Employees Savings Department offered a savings plan with five percent interest, and in 1916, Rosenwald set up "The Savings and Profit Sharing Pension Fund of Sears Roebuck and Co Employees (*sic*)," whereby Sears contributed a percentage of profits to the fund.

By 1900 Sears surpassed Montgomery Ward and Company with over \$10 million in sales, driven by its catalog which continued to be written by Richard Sears. It emphasized a close rapport with customers,



offering guarantees, low prices, return policy and customer service.

By 1904, when Sears executives began planning the new company headquarters, the company was the largest retail concern in the United States, reaching every corner of American society. In that year, they purchased 41.6 acres of land on Chicago's West Side, where they could assemble enough land to centralize all of the company functions. The location had much to offer, being close to elevated transportation lines for employees and to rail lines for receiving incoming materials and shipping outgoing orders. The North Lawndale area at that time was experiencing great growth. The area including the Sears site had been annexed to the city in 1869, and was named "Lawndale" soon after by speculative real estate developers who played up the West Side's three new large parks. In 1871 McCormick built a large reaper plant nearby, resulting in the creation of residential communities. Other industrial plants followed, lured also by the several railroad tracks that lined the area. Transportation played a key role in the growth of North Lawndale in the 1890's with the expansion of the Garfield Park elevated tracks into the area.

Construction of the Administration Building shown here, along with the other facilities, was an immense undertaking that provided jobs for thousands of workers in many trades.

Rosenwald commissioned the architectural firm of Nimmons and Fellows to design a facility that would bring together all of the functions of the company. The new Mail Order Plant was to include the Administration Building, the Printing Building, the nearly three-million square foot Merchandise Building (which would be the largest commercial structure in America at the time), and the Power Plant. Ground was broken on January 24, 1905, and the construction firm of Thompson-Starrett began the immense project of building over 4 million square feet of new facilities. Seven thousand construction workers were needed to complete the project, and 60 freight-car loads of building

materials were brought to the site each day. On January 22, 1906, all operations were transferred to the new facility.

The new plant was a great success. It helped fulfill Rosenwald's goals of better organization of the company, greater efficiency in filling orders, and a more sound financial footing. The new Administration Building was described in promotional literature thusly, "This beautiful building with its large, well lighted and perfectly ventilated offices, is an ideal office structure, with every convenience and every office appliance designed to facilitate the prompt and accurate handling of the business transacted here." For 1906, the first full year in the new facility, Sears had 9,290 employees on site and sales were more than \$50 million. In June of that year, the company issued preferred stock which was listed on the New York Stock Exchange immediately and provided a desired infusion of capital.

That high point did not last long, as a financial panic in 1907 led to decreasing financial health of the company and differences of opinion between Richard Sears and Julius Rosenwald. They differed in their responses to the panic, during which sales dropped by 37%. Rosenwald and other executives opposed Sears' advertising and promotion program, which they felt was draining the company. Sears consequently resigned in 1908, and Rosenwald became president. Sears continued as Chairman of the Board for a brief time, then as a member of the board until 1913. The company prospered during the following years under Rosenwald's tenure. By 1920 total yearly sales had increased to \$245 million, and the Sears catalog was 1,200 pages in length. Much of the increased prosperity was due to a generally strong economy buoyed by unprecedented agricultural prosperity. The advent of parcel post in 1913, which reduced the shipping costs for mail order items, also contributed.

World War I brought changes to the company as the priorities of industry and of individuals shifted. Rosenwald entered government service and the company was left to less talented executives. After the war, the United States entered a depression in late 1920-21 which severely reduced farm incomes. Since Sears depended heavily on the agricultural market, this led to reduced demand for products and overstock of items. The company found itself in trouble. Rosenwald virtually saved the company at this time by contributing \$20 million of his own funds to turn it around. The turn around was slow due to the increased urbanization of society, which in turn was fueled by the increasing mobility afforded by the automobile. The younger generation was leaving the farm and moving to the cities for better opportunities. The increased use of automobiles also led to the spread of chain stores that were more easily accessible. To help retain rural customers, in

1923 the Sears Roebuck Agricultural Foundation was created, which sponsored educational farm programs, assistance and community service. Sears' Farm Service Division was directed by a Mail Order Farm Advisor. In the mid-1920s, more than 50 million catalogs were sent out annually.

In order to survive and grow, however, it was necessary for Sears to compete with retail stores by opening its own retail establishments. It was General Robert Wood who first anticipated this trend in retailing when he was with Montgomery Ward. Unable to convince the company president, he left Montgomery Ward and was hired by Sears in 1924. Wood subsequently opened the first Sears retail store on February 2, 1925, in the Chicago mail order plant. Other retail stores soon followed. It was Wood's idea that "most of the company's retail stores could be located in outlying districts which would offer the advantages of lower rentals yet would also, because of the great mobility of Americans, still be within reach of potential customers." Wood proved right, retail sales grew steadily, and by 1931 accounted for more than half of all sales. Retail sales continued to outstrip catalog sales until the catalog was finally abandoned in the 1980's.

In 1928, Robert Wood became president of the company, inspiring new and innovative Sears products and services. In further response to the new mobile society, in that year he initiated Sears' manufacture and sales of automobile tires. An employee competition led to the selection of the brand name "Allstate," which soon came to apply also to automobile supplies and accessories. In 1931 Allstate expanded to offer automobile insurance and later spun off Allstate Fire Insurance. Allstate



Sears entered store retailing in 1925, a move that carried it through the depression of the 1920s, from catalog sales to dominance of the retail market.

General Robert Wood, right, with President Franklin D. Roosevelt, at the American Retail Federation banquet, Washington, D.C., July, 1939.



continued to grow, occupying its own building in the complex in 1949, and is now one of the largest insurance companies in America. Also under Wood's lead, Sears entered banking in 1931 with the creation of the Sears Community State Bank. Due to the retail stores, Sears was able to prosper through the depression. By 1938, annual sales were over \$500 million. Wood became chairman of the board in 1939, with a policy of continuing to increase services in addition to products and building up the retail and Allstate businesses. During World War II, many employees went into the service and many factories converted to war work, but the result was only a slight slowdown of growth. By 1947, sales reached over \$3 billion per year, and \$5 out of every \$100 spent in the United States for general merchandise went to Sears. Wood retired in 1954, leaving behind a greatly expanded company. By 1964, Sears surpassed the A&P (Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Co., Inc.) grocery chain as the world's largest retailers, with executive headquarters that still occupied the Administration Building until Sears' relocation to the Chicago Loop in 1974.

By the 1960's, demolition of some of the smaller and older structures of the Sears, Roebuck and Company mail order complex had occurred and the physical fabric of the residential area immediately surrounding the plant had begun to deteriorate. There were demolitions occurring over the next few decades, along with the construction of new parking lots and a garage. Mail order operations were closed at the Sears plant in 1987. The Merchandise Building, except for its tower, was demolished in 1995 as part of a redevelopment of the site. As part of the Homan Square development, new townhouses surround the complex and a new

community center has been constructed on the site of the Merchandise Building, in the midst of open park. The other buildings, including the Administration Building, survived and have been maintained by the Homan Arthington Foundation. The Administration Building and the Research and Development Building (originally the Printing and Advertising Building) have remained partially occupied as offices for a variety of businesses, not-for-profit and public organizations. Homan Square has maintained its offices in the Administration Building. In 2001, the Administration Building was sold at auction. The new owner is rehabilitating the building and maintaining the Garden and Pergola across the street.

Criteria for Designation

According to the Municipal Code of Chicago (Sec. 2-120-620 and -630), the Commission on Chicago Landmarks has the authority to recommend landmark designation for a building, structure, or district if the Commission determines it meets two or more of the stated "criteria for landmark designation," as well as possesses a significant degree of its historic design integrity.

The following should be considered by the Commission on Chicago Landmarks in determining whether to recommend that the Sears, Roebuck and Company Administration Building be designated as a Chicago Landmark.

Criterion I: Critical Part of the City's Heritage

Its value as an example of the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social or other aspect of the history of the heritage of the City of Chicago, the State of Illinois or the United States.

The Sears, Roebuck and Company Administration Building was the headquarters building for the Sears, Roebuck and Company from its completion in early 1906 until 1973, housing the primary executive offices, financial operations and order processing for the country's premier mail-order company.

Sears, Roebuck and Company, which began as a mail order company, became the largest merchandiser in the United States through both catalogs and retail stores. The Sears catalog offered everything needed for the house, farm and family to rural and small-town Americans in the early part of the 20th century. From the Chicago plant, millions of orders were sent across the country by rail and truck over a period of more than 80 years, retaining the company as an important mail-order company until the end of its catalog operation in the 1980's. Beginning in the 1920's Sears responded to the newly emerging mobile

American society by opening retail stores and offering additional services such as insurance through the Allstate brand. These adaptations preserved its position as a major, national economic generator and increased its market share through the depression and beyond. Both retail and services gradually surpassed the mail order business. Although its headquarters moved out of the Administration Building in 1973, Sears retail stores retain an important merchandising niche into the 21st Century, mostly in suburban, small-town and rural areas.

Sears, Roebuck and Company was significant to the economic history and growth of Chicago from 1894 through the 20th Century.

In 1906, the year in which the completed plant opened in Chicago's North Lawndale neighborhood, the firm had 9,290 employees on site and sales were more than \$50 million.

In addition to employing thousands, the shipping of raw materials and manufactured items to Chicago and of catalogs and products from Chicago throughout the country contributed to many different Chicago industries. As orders went out, payment brought the supply of money back into the city where it went to employees, materials, railroads, shippers and ultimately to city government in the form of taxes.

Sears also contributed to the development of the city by its location in the nascent North Lawndale neighborhood. When Sears moved there, the site was undeveloped, as there had been only a few industrial and commercial structures existing in the area. The land had been plotted for a residential community, which was just beginning to take hold. The new plant encouraged solid growth on the city's West Side with the influx of employees who needed residences and services and had the financial resources to purchase them. From the time of its move to the site, Sears contributed to the amenities and cultural resources of the community, including a park, store, library, and evening educational programs. As one of Chicago's large employers, Sears, Roebuck and Company's policies of providing innovative benefits and programs encouraged similar programs by other businesses at a time when employee conditions were poor in much of the city. Sears' executives, throughout the years, have been leaders in Chicago's cultural and social community.

Criterion 3: Significant Persons

Its identification with a person or persons who significantly contributed to the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social, or other aspect of the development of the City of Chicago, the State of Illinois, or the United States.

The Sears, Roebuck and Company Administration Building is associated with the careers and lives of prominent Chicago citizens Richard Sears, Julius Rosenwald and Robert Wood, each of who made vital contributions both to the success of the company and the history of Chicago.

Richard Warren Sears (1863-1914), founder of the company, was also president from its founding in 1892 until 1908, when he resigned that post and became chairman of the board, remaining as a director until 1913. James Worthly has commented that Sears "was one of the great promotional geniuses in American business history." Together with his partners, he developed his fledgling mail order watch business into the largest and best known mail order company in the world. Throughout his career, he concentrated on increasing sales. As long as he was with the company Sears wrote the catalog himself, which was the company's best sales tool. He was also an enthusiastic and creative promoter, responding to customers' needs with creative solutions that offered merchandise guarantees, competitive prices, return policies, customer service and incentives such as coupons. He relentlessly pursued company growth through advertising and all kinds of promotions. But in addition to founding and promoting the company, he was apt at choosing skilled leadership with whom to partner in his successes.

Though Richard Sears was the founder of the company, his partner and immediate successor **Julius Rosenwald (1862-1932)** became a more prominent citizen of Chicago. Rosenwald was as well known for his philanthropic efforts as for his successes in business, as his contributions to both were many. Rosenwald joined the company in 1894 as vice president, and added treasurer to his title in 1901. When Sears resigned as president in 1908, Rosenwald took over the position and held it until 1928, remaining as chairman of the board until 1932. Rosenwald's major asset to the company was his managerial and organizational talent. It was he who pushed through the idea that a new plant was needed to centralize the functions of the company and bring order to chaos. He hired architects Nimmons and Fellows and worked with them through the design process of the new plant. He also brought many new employee benefit programs, amenities and guidance to the company. Though Rosenwald devoted his adult life to what he called "the store," in 1916 President Woodrow Wilson appointed him chairman of the committee on supplies for the Advisory Commission of the Council of National Defense. When the council was taken over the War Industries Board, Rosenwald became involved in other war-related work until 1919. After the war, he retained Sears' expansion into Dallas and supported additional expansion with offices in Seattle and Philadelphia. He instituted the idea of direct manufacture of many products, and of an on-site quality testing lab. In 1921, he further displayed his loyalty



Richard Sears was the founder of the company, and the spirit at the heart of its early operation.



Julius Rosenwald, Sears' partner, became the brains of the company. He used his own fortune to bail the company out of hard times and gave millions of dollars to charities.

during the economic recession by pledging \$20 million of his personal funds to the company, which returned it to a solid financial footing.

In the area of philanthropy, Rosenwald gave generously of his time and money. Inspired by reading *Up From Slavery* and by meeting Booker T. Washington, he supported many programs to benefit the quality of life for black Americans, including the establishment of public schools for blacks in the south. In 1911, he offered \$25,000 toward construction of a YMCA for blacks to each community that raised a \$75,000 match. Over twelve cities qualified. On his fiftieth birthday in 1912, he made charitable contributions of \$700,000, including funds to the Tuskegee Institute where he served as a trustee. In 1917, he established the Julius Rosenwald Fund, which gave over \$17 million to his causes. In Chicago, he contributed to the establishment of many of the city's major institutions such as the University of Chicago and was instrumental in establishing the Adler Planetarium. He is well remembered for sponsoring housing projects such as the progressive Michigan Avenue Garden Apartments, located in Chicago's Bronzeville neighborhood and marketed to moderate and low-income African-Americans.



General Robert E. Wood became a legend, bringing the skills he developed in the military and the Panama Canal project first to Montgomery Ward and then to Sears in 1924. He pushed hard for retail stores, seeing the need to tap a newly mobile society.

Robert Elkington Wood (1879-1969) also had many accomplishments as a leader of the company. After graduation from West Point in 1900, followed by an illustrious military career in the Philippines, the Panama Canal, and World War I, Wood became a brigadier general and received a Distinguished Service Medal. In 1919, he became a vice president for merchandising for rival mail-order company Montgomery Ward. Unhappy there, he offered his services to Julius Rosenwald and was hired as vice president of Sears in 1924. Wood provided strong forward-looking leadership during the depression and beyond, recognizing that the automobile was fast becoming a mainstay of American life and that automobile related services and products would appeal to the customers. He strongly encouraged and achieved the expansion of Sears into retail stores across the country, which allowed it to prosper during the depression. In 1928 he became president of the company, and under his leadership Sears' stock increased 1,082 percent in 25 years, as retail sales overtook the mail order business. He was also responsible for the founding of Allstate, which began as a catalog tire brand in 1928. By 1931 General Wood realized that Sears could extend its services to the public by offering auto insurance by mail. The company grew, and expanded into fire and auto insurance. In 1949 the company moved out of the Administration Building and into its own headquarters on the east edge of the complex. Today Allstate has become the nation's largest publicly held personal lines insurer with over 14 million customers and some 50,000 employees. Allstate became a public company in 1993 with the largest initial public offering in history to that date, and in 1995 it became a totally independent

company after divesting its remaining shares to Sears stockholders.

Serving at a time of great growth, Wood, too, was interested in the welfare of the employees, and instituted yet more innovative benefit programs. He believed that, "Business must account for its stewardship not only on the balance sheet but also in matters of social responsibility." In 1939 he also became chairman of the board, serving until his retirement in 1954.

Criterion 4: Important Architecture

Its exemplification of an architectural type or style distinguished by innovation, rarity, uniqueness or overall quality of design, detail, materials, or craftsmanship.

The Sears, Roebuck Company Administration Building is a significant example of a large-scale early twentieth century commercial building, important for its synthesis of function and corporate image.

The Administration Building is an example of the commercial architecture of the early twentieth century that resulted from the requirements of commerce and business principles that created the Chicago School with its emphasis on both utility and aesthetics. The characteristic design with defined cells of piers and spandrels which directly reflect the underlying structure was a type that flourished in Chicago. Usually calculated for high floor loads, the column and beam structural systems create the articulated cellular wall which defines the fenestration pattern as the spaces between columns are filled with windows to



In the projecting main entry, embellished with classical details, Sears Roebuck and Company hoped to convey an image of permanence and prosperity.

The regular pattern of continuous projecting piers and recessed spandrels creates the cellular form that is characteristic of the Chicago School. The horizontal banding and parapet treatments are typical of the work of George C. Nimmons.





Ornamental details, such as those shown here above the entry, are delicately rendered in granite and terra-cotta. The ornament combines traditional Classical Revival elements with more modern, flat Sullivanesque and geometric decoration.

provide maximum light. The typical facade treatment, expressed with ornate base and top stories and simpler treatment in between, lends itself to the accommodation of more or fewer stories and bays as the function requires. The I-shaped plan of the Administration Building, with projecting end and entry bays, was both functional and attractive, and widely used by Nimmons and Fellows in later designs. In merging the concerns of utility, cost, construction technique and architectural character the Administration Building was a great success.

The Sears, Roebuck and Company Administration Building exhibits a high degree of quality in its detail and ornament which exemplify the company's concern with artistic ideals and its corporate image.

The symmetrical and cellular facades of the Administration Building are ornamented primarily with Classical Revival details, often chosen for buildings of the time as a result of the lingering influence of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition. In addition, however, classically inspired ornament lends itself to the formality of this structural expressiveness and to the building proportions. An added benefit to Sears was that classicism also creates an image of permanence and reflects the democratic ideals of American business. The dark red brick of the building is embellished with terra-cotta belt courses and with the original flat frieze above the second story which rests upon composite capitals that cap the piers. Detached columns with Corinthian capitals frame the projecting entry and the corners of the building. The pediment over the entry and the various ornamental medallions, blocks, and keystones contribute to its distinction. In addition to the elaborate entry, the building lobby with its marble and plaster molding afforded further opportunity to impress the public. Sears' promotional literature at the time noted that, "In quiet elegance we doubt whether this lobby is excelled in any building in the City of Chicago."

Other ornament on the building points to more modern sources. The frieze above the second story and elements of the central entry feature Sullivanesque foliated medallions. Those features and the peaked, outlined parapets of the projecting end pavilions of the 1914 building top are signature Nimmons elements. Also typical of his work are the flat, geometric panels of non-historic design which look forward to the 1920's.

The Sears, Roebuck and Company Administration Building shows the commitment of George C. Nimmons and William K. Fellows to modern commercial architecture.

As the architect's largest commission to date, the Sears Roebuck and Company complex gave Nimmons and Fellows the opportunity to

develop many of their ideas for large commercial buildings. The Administration Building, containing executive offices, was the most refined of the complex and clearly gave expression to their early concern for function and modern aesthetics. The Administration Building's 1905 anticipation of the later work of Nimmons is evident in the way the 1914 upper floors merge seamlessly with the original. The projecting continuous piers and recessed spandrels outlined with terra cotta on the upper floors are a continuation of the design of the lower floors, with the resulting whole resembling closely Nimmons' 1914 Reid, Murdoch and Company Building, a designated a Chicago Landmark. The Reid, Murdoch and Company Building's repetitive bays separated by slightly projecting piers, projecting corner bays, belt courses, cornices, and a prominent central entry are all features which were also employed earlier on the Administration Building. Also similar are the building proportions, the use of red brick with contrasting terra cotta and limestone, the signature horizontal bands near the summit, peaked parapets and flat geometric details.

Criterion 5: Important Architect

Its identification as the work of an architect, designer, engineer or builder whose individual work is significant in the history of development of Chicago, the State of Illinois, or the United States.

The Sears, Roebuck and Company Administration Building is one of the finest works of George C. Nimmons, working both alone and in partnership with William K. Fellows, whose commercial and industrial building designs were significant for their combination of Chicago School forms with Prairie and Sullivan-esque detailing.

George Croll Nimmons (1867- 1947) was born in Wooster, Ohio, in 1867. He studied architecture in Europe before entering the office of Chicago architects Burnham & Root in 1885. In 1897 he formed the partnership of Nimmons and Fellows with **William Kinne Fellows (1870-1948)**. Fellows was born in 1870 in Winona, Minnesota. He studied at the Columbia University School of Mines and Architecture, and then trained in several architectural offices in New York City before studying in Europe. He then settled in Chicago and, shortly thereafter, joined Nimmons in their new partnership.

Nimmons and Fellows (1897-1910) was well known for progressive designs for large-scale industrial and commercial buildings, and the Sears, Roebuck and Company headquarters complex, including the original two-story Administration Building, was one of the firm's first major commissions. They became known for their combination of Chicago School design principles, including the clear, rational expres-



The Reid Murdoch and Company Building was designed by George C. Nimmons in 1913-14, at the same time he was designing the top three floors of the Sears Roebuck and Company Administration Building. This photo illustrates how the buildings share many signature features, including fine brickwork and Chicago School expression of structure.

sion of underlying structure, with both traditional and progressive ornamentation, including Classical and Prairie-style ornament. Other notable buildings designed by the firm include the Leshner Building (1902), Stratford Building (1907), Dixon Building (1908), and Railway Terminal Building (1909).

After the partnership of Nimmons and Fellows dissolved in 1910, Fellows joined the firm of Hamilton, Fellows & Perkins, significant during the 1910s and 20s for their many Midwestern school buildings, while Nimmons went into solo practice under the firm name of **George C. Nimmons & Co (1910-1917)**. The 1914 addition to the Sears, Roebuck and Company Administration Building were designed by Nimmons during this period. He became nationally known for industrial buildings that combined practicality with visual elegance. During the 1910s and 20s, Nimmons wrote a series of influential articles on progressive designs for modern industrial buildings for *Architectural Record* and *American Architect*. Notable buildings that he designed after the original portion of the Administration Building include the Second Franklin Building (1912), part of the Printing House Row Chicago Landmark district and the Reid, Murdoch and Company Building at 325 North LaSalle Street (1914, designated a Chicago Landmark on Novem-

ber 15, 1976). George Nimmons also designed, along with Max Dunning, the American Furniture Mart (680 North Lake Shore Drive) in phases from 1923 - 1926. He retired in 1945 as senior partner of Nimmons, Carr & Wright.

Integrity Criterion

The integrity of the proposed landmark must be preserved in light of its location, design, setting, materials, workmanship and ability to express its historic, community, architectural or aesthetic interest or value.

The Sears, Roebuck and Company Administration Building has a very high percentage of its significant historic features. It retains almost all of its historic exterior features, including its overall form and footprint, symmetry of design, historic arrangement of entrances and windows, and ornamentation. Most of its historic wood double-hung windows remain, as well as decorative detailing including stone columns and terra-cotta cornices, friezes, medallions, and belt courses. In 1917 there was a small service building added to the south, rear elevation, consisting of basement and first floor levels. Other exterior changes include alterations to the building's east and west (secondary) entrances and the removal of some terra-cotta detailing and the original parapet above the north (main) entrance.

The building's main lobby, entered from the north entrance, retains a geometric-patterned marble floor, ornamental cornice, and decorative wall moldings. A staircase leading up half a flight from the lobby to the first-floor main corridor has an ornamental metal railing. Secondary interior staircases also retain original iron railings and posts. Other interior spaces, including executive and clerical offices and support spaces, have been extensively remodeled over the years.

Significant Historical and Architectural Features

Whenever a building is under consideration for landmark designation, the Commission on Chicago Landmarks is required to identify the "significant historical and architectural features" of the property. This is done to enable the owners and the public to understand which elements are considered most important to preserve the historical and architectural character of the proposed landmark. Based on its preliminary evaluation of the Sears, Roebuck and Company Administration Building, the Commission staff recommends that the significant features be identified as:

- all exterior elevations of the building, including rooflines

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ILLUSTRATIONS

From Sears, Roebuck and Company Archives: front cover(inset), inside front cover, 3(top and bottom), 4(left and right), 5, 7.

Dennis McClendon: front cover, 2.

From Emmet and Jeuck: 13(top and bottom), 14.

From Worthy: 10.

Susan Baldwin, Baldwin Historic Properties: 15 (top and bottom).
inside back cover

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The elaborate entry illustrates the skilled use of materials and the blending of classical ornament with more modern designs.

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